Chapter Thirteen

THE SO-CALLED MUṢḤAF OF IBN MASʿŪD AND ALLEGED VARIANCES THEREIN

As mentioned earlier, Arthur Jeffery examined 170 volumes to compile a list of variant readings which take up roughly 300 pages in printed form, covering the so-called personal Muṣḥafs of nearly thirty scholars. Of this total he reserves 88 pages for the variations allegedly coming from Ibn Masʿūd's Muṣḥaf alone, with another 65 pages for Ubayy's Muṣḥaf, dividing the remainder (140 pages) between the other twenty-eight. The disproportionately high variance rate attributed to Ibn Masʿūd makes his Muṣḥaf worthy of closer inspection; some of the claims raised by Jeffery against it are:

- That it differs from the ʿUthmāni Muṣḥaf in its sūra arrangement,
- And in its text,
- And that it omits three sūras.

He levies all these charges even though no one, including his sources, has ever witnessed a 'Muṣḥaf' with all these alleged variances. In truth none of his references even mentions a 'Muṣḥaf of Ibn Masʿūd'; instead they use the word *qara'a* (قرأ: read), in the context of "Ibn Masʿūd recited such-and-such verse in this way". A cursory glance at his sources yields two objections straightaway. First, because they never state that Ibn Masʿūd was reading from a written copy we can just as easily assume that he was overheard reciting from memory, and how can we confidently deduce that the erroneous readings were not due to a memory slip? Second (and this is a point I made earlier), the vast majority of Jeffery's references contain no *isnād* whatsoever, making them inadmissible because they offer nothing but empty gossip.

Comparing a Muṣḥaf attributed to any scholar with ʿUthmān's Muṣḥaf is utterly meaningless unless we can show that both are of equal status, proving the authenticity of the former to the same degree of certainty that we have for the latter. The contents of a Muṣḥaf, just like a *ḥadīth* or *qirā'at*, can be reported in such a way that scholars find it:

1. Authentic with absolute certainty, or
2. Doubtful, or
3. Absolutely false (whether due to inadvertent or deliberate errors).

Suppose that many well-known students of Ibn Mas'ūd (such as al-Aswad, Masrūq, ash-Shaibānī, Abū Wā'il, al-Hamadānī, 'Alqama, Zirr, and others) report a statement unanimously; in this case their attribution of this statement to Ibn Mas'ūd is considered valid and admissible. If the overwhelming majority are agreed while one or two well-known students report to the contrary, then the minority account is termed 'doubtful'. And should this minority group contain only weak or unknown pupils, contradicting the consensus of those who are renowned, then this falls into the third category of absolute falsehood.

In the course of collating manuscripts 'equal status' becomes a vital concept. If we uncover a document penned in the original author's hand, then the scholarly value of duplicate copies belonging to his most famous students (let alone a mysterious student) plummets to nil. To do otherwise and confer equal value to both the original and the duplicate, is completely unscientific.[1] With this in mind let us approach Jeffery's allegations.

1. *First Point: The Arrangement of Ibn Mas'ūd's Muṣḥaf*

While none of Ibn Mas'ūd's peers mentions a Muṣḥaf of his bearing a different sūra arrangement, quite a few of them seem to have sprung up after his death. An-Nadīm quotes al-Faḍl bin Shādhān, "I found the sūra arrangement in Ibn Mas'ūd's Muṣḥaf as follows: *al-Baqara, an-Nisā', Āli-'Imrān* .... [*i.e.* no *al-Fātiḥa*]."[2] Following this with his own commentary, an-Nadīm says that he has personally seen numerous Muṣḥafs ascribed to Ibn Mas'ūd but has been unable to find any two in agreement with each other, adding that he has also come across one copied during the second century of Hijra which includes *Sūra al-Fātiḥa*. But because al-Faḍl bin Shādhān is reckoned a leading authority on this subject, an-Nadīm decides to quote him rather than accentuate his own observations.[3] An-Nadīm's commentary proves that those who claim a discrepancy in Ibn Mas'ūd's Muṣḥaf cannot, with even the minutest degree of certainty, state what the actual arrangement was.

A significant number of famous students studied *Sharī'a* (Islamic law and jurisprudence) under Ibn Mas'ūd and transmitted the Qur'ān from him. Regarding his Muṣḥaf we find two conflicting reports: in one the arrangement of sūras is different from ours, while in the other it is exactly

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1 This has been discussed earlier; see pp. 81-82.

2 An-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 29.

3 *ibid*, p. 29.

identical. The former report fails to arrive at any collective agreement about the sequence of sūras however, and is greatly overshadowed by the sureness of the latter. Clearly this more concrete version is the one that warrants our consideration. Al-Quraẓī recounts seeing the Muṣḥafs used by Ibn Masʿūd, Ubayy, and Zaid b. Thābit, and finding among them no differences.[4]

By consensus, professional reciters follow the vocal inflections of any of the seven most distinguished reciters (القرّاء): ʿUthmān, ʿAlī, Zaid b. Thābit, Ubayy, Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, Abū ad-Dardā', and Ibn Masʿūd. Transmission chains for these recitations continue unbroken back to the Prophet, and the sūra arrangement in each is identical to that of the existing Qur'ān. We must also recall that, even if we give any credence to the aberrant accounts, differences in sūra arrangement do not affect the contents of the Qur'ān in any way.[5]

Having memorised most of the Book directly from the Prophet, Ibn Masʿūd was critical and furious for being excluded from the committee which prepared the ʿUthmāni Muṣḥaf, resorting to some harsh remarks which the Companions found distasteful. Afterwards, his anger spent, he may have expressed remorse for his hasty comments and rearranged the sūras in his Muṣḥaf to reflect the ʿUthmāni sequence. This might be the origin of both reports, that his sequence was similar and dissimilar to ʿUthmān's, though the truth is best known to Allāh. The divergent nature of the many 'Muṣḥafs of Ibn Masʿūd' that materialised after his death, with no two in agreement, shows that the wholesale ascription of these to him is erroneous, and the scholars who did so neglected to examine their sources well. Sadly the less scrupulous among antique dealers found it profitable, for the weight of a few silver pieces, to add fake Muṣḥafs of Ibn Masʿūd or Ubayy to their wares.[6]

2. *Second Point: The Text Differed from Our Muṣḥaf*

I mentioned above the need for some kind of certitude about Ibn Masʿūd's Muṣḥaf. While researching variant readings, Abū Ḥayyān an-Naḥawī noticed that most of the reports were channeled through Shiite sources; Sunnī scholars on the other hand stated that Ibn Masʿūd's readings were in line with the rest of the Muslim *umma*.[7] What has trickled through to us

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4 A. Jeffery (ed.), *Muqaddimatān*, p. 47.

5 See this work pp. 72-73.

6 See A. Jeffery (ed.), *Muqaddimatān*, pp. 47-48.

7 Abū Ḥayyān an-Naḥawī, *Tafsīr Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, i:161.

via isolated sources cannot supersede what is known with certainty. In pages 57-73 of *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* (edited by Jeffery), under the chapter of "Muṣḥaf of ʿAbdullāh b. Masʿūd," we find a lengthy collection of variants all stemming from al-Aʿmash (*d.* 148 A.H.). Not only does al-Aʿmash fail to furnish any references for this – hardly surprising given his proclivity for *tadlīs* (تدليس: concealing the source of information) – he is moreover accused of Shiite tendencies.[8] Many other examples lend further support to Abū Ḥayyān's inference of a Shiite connection. In his book Jeffery attributes the following reading to Ubayy and Ibn Masʿūd (there is no reference):

> والسابقون بالإيمان بالنبي عليه السلام فهم عليٌّ وذريته الذين اصطفاهم الله من أصحابه
> وجعلهم الموالي على غيرهم. أولئك هم الفائزون الذين يرثون الفردوس هم فيها خالدون.[9]
>
> And the foremost to believe in the Prophet, peace be upon him, are ʿAlī and his descendents whom Allāh has chosen from among his Companions, appointing them viceroys over all others. They are the winners who shall inherit the Gardens, residing therein forever.

While in the Qur'ān it is: والسابقون السابقون أولئك المقربون ("*But the foremost will be [those who in life were] the foremost [in faith and good deeds]*").[10] Such a glowing tribute to ʿAlī's descendants undoubtedly served the Shiite cause.[11]

Embarking on any research requires a solid footing, whereas here we discover ourselves drowning in a sea of hearsay that carries almost no transmission chains and that fails to provide any coherent view of what 'Ibn Masʿūd's Muṣḥaf' might have been. Under the circumstances Jeffery's approach and findings, we can see, are fundamentally flawed.

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8 For details, see al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, xi:87-92.

9 A. Jeffery, *Materials*, p. 97.

10 Qur'ān 56:10-11.

11 Till very recently, it had been the tendency of Shiite theologians to cast doubt on the Qur'ān, for the simple reason that the Qur'ān was first collected by Abū Bakr, then copied and distributed by ʿUthmān and not ʿAlī. The strange thing is that ʿAlī himself stuck to the same Muṣḥaf, *i.e.* Muṣḥaf of ʿUthmān and never brought forth a new edition. Recently, however, a new and healthier trend has been emerging. A few years ago in a conference in Tehran, Iran, Shiite authorities announced that they did not have any Muṣḥaf besides that of ʿUthmān, and that it is pure and free of any corruption. As a matter of fact, one does not find a Muṣḥaf printed in Iran or manuscripts of the Qur'ān in Najaf, Qum, Mashhad ... *etc.* which differ from the common Muṣḥaf found in any other part of the world.

3. *Third Point: Three Sūras were Omitted*

The first and last two sūras (*Sūra al-Fātiḥa*, *al-Falaq* and *an-Nās*) were, according to some accounts, absent from the Muṣḥaf of Ibn Masʿūd.[12] The whole case seems dubious. Jeffery begins his book with the alleged variants from *Sūra al-Fātiḥa*: أرشدنا instead of أهدنا, and مَن instead of الذين.[13] Elsewhere he argues that this sūra was never present, so then where exactly did he get his variants? The reader may recall an-Nadīm's earlier comment, that he happened upon a Muṣḥaf attributed to Ibn Masʿūd which contained *Sūra al-Fātiḥa*. Bear in mind also that *al-Fātiḥa* is unquestionably the most recited sūra in the Qurʾān, an integral part of every *rakʿa* (ركعة) within each prayer. In the audible prayers alone it echoes from mosques six times a day and eight times on Friday. Any claims of a variant recitation for *al-Fātiḥa* cannot be taken seriously, based on pure logic and the sheer repetition of this sūra on every Muslim ear since the time of the Prophet.[14]

Anyone with a penchant for copying certain sūras and not others is free to do so; even the scribbling of extra information in the margins is permitted, so long as it is kept separate from the holy text. Such occurrences cannot be taken as an argument against the Qurʾān's integrity. That the ʿUthmāni Muṣḥaf contains the unadulterated Words of Allāh as sectioned into 114 sūrahs, is the firm belief of the Muslim *umma*; anyone eschewing this view is an outcast. Had Ibn Masʿūd denied these three sūras their rightful status then his fate would have been no different.

Al-Bāqillānī arrives at a comprehensive and highly convincing argument against these reports. He observes that anyone denying a particular sūra as part of the Qurʾān is either an apostate or a *fāsiq* (فاسق: wicked deviant), and so one of the two must apply to Ibn Masʿūd if the accounts are indeed true. In several *ḥadīths* the Prophet praised him and lauded his piety however, which is inconceivable had he harboured such deviance. Ibn Masʿūd's peers were also under obligation, if they knew anything sacrilegious about

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12 As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, i:220-21. These are sūras No. 1, 113 and 114 respectively.

13 A. Jeffery, *Materials*, p. 25.

14 Today nearly half a million people participate in the *tarāwīḥ* (تراويح) prayers in Makkah during the month of Ramaḍān (and in some nights, especially the 27th, in excess of one million). [See the Saudi daily, Ar-Riyāḍ, 1 Jan. 2000] Only the best among the *ḥuffāẓ* (who have completely memorised the Qurʾān) are chosen to lead this massive congregation. With modern technology we can instantaneously watch these proceedings, and we find that if even the best ḥāfiẓ commits an error, the people behind correct him immediately. A congregation will never allow an error to pass uncorrected, irrespective of the imām's reputation or greatness. This gives us a measure of the community's sensitivity towards the Book of Allāh.

his beliefs, to expose him as a deviant or apostate because failure to do so would lead to their own censure. But his contemporaries praised his scholarship unanimously without a single dissenting voice. In al-Bāqillānī's mind this can only mean one of two possibilities: either Ibn Mas'ūd never denied the rightful status of any sūra, or that his scholarly peers and all who knew him are guilty of covering up his blasphemy and deserve immediate denunciation *en masse*.[15]

i. Analysis of the Contents of Ibn Mas'ūd's Muṣḥaf

Reports concerning the omission of these sūras can be listed as follows; the transmission chain precedes each narration.

- 'Āṣim – Zirr (one of Ibn Mas'ūd's students) – Ibn Mas'ūd: a narration claiming that he did not write two sūras (Nos. 113 and 114) in his Muṣḥaf.[16]
- Al-A'mash – Abū Isḥāq – 'Abdur-Raḥmān b. Yazīd: Ibn Mas'ūd erased the *mu'awwadhatain* (المعوذتين: Sūras 113 and 114) from his Maṣāḥif (plural) and said that they were not part of the Qur'ān.[17]
- Ibn 'Uyayna – 'Abdah and 'Āṣim – Zirr: "I told Ubayy, 'Your brother erases Sūras 113 and 114 from the Muṣḥaf', to which he did not object." Asked whether the reference was to Ibn Mas'ūd, Ibn 'Uyayna replied in the affirmative and added that the two sūras were not in his Muṣḥaf because he believed them to be invocations of divine protection, used by the Prophet on his grandsons al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusain. Ibn Mas'ūd remained adamant of his opinion, while others were sure about them and kept them in the Qur'ān.[18]

So in the second and third report Ibn Mas'ūd was deleting sūras that had somehow found their way into his Muṣḥaf; why then had he penned them down in the first place? It makes no sense. If we suppose that the Muṣḥaf had been scribed for him and initially contained the two concluding sūras, then they must necessarily have been an integral part of the Muṣḥaf which was then in circulation. Had he any doubts about these two sūras, it was Ibn Mas'ūd's duty to verify this issue with the scholars of Madinah and elsewhere. In one *fatwā* (فتوى: legislative ruling) he declared that a man marrying a woman but divorcing her prior to any consummation was free to then wed her mother. Visiting Madinah and discussing the matter further,

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15 Al-Bāqillānī, *al-Intiṣār*, pp. 190-191.

16 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, v:129, ḥadīth nos. 21224-25.

17 *ibid*, v:129-130, ḥadīth no. 21226.

18 *ibid*, v:130, ḥadīth no. 21227.

he discovered that he had erred and rescinded the *fatwā*; his first errand upon returning to Kūfa was to visit the person who had solicited his opinion and tell him of his mistake. Such was his attitude in the academic sphere, and how much more pressing are issues touching the Qurʾān. All reasonable evidence indicates that the whole episode is spurious, and indeed early scholars such as an-Nawawī and Ibn Ḥazm denounced these reports as lies fathered upon Ibn Masʿūd.[19]

Ibn Ḥajar, among the *muḥaddithīn's* leading scholars, objects to this conclusion. Since Ibn Ḥanbal, Bazzār, aṭ-Ṭabarānī and others quoted this incident with authentic transmission chains, he reasons that the allegations cannot be discarded; to do otherwise is to negate a genuine *ḥadīth* without any relevant support. Attempting to harmonise between the disparate reports, Ibn Ḥajar resorted to Ibn aṣ-Ṣabbāgh's interpretation: at the time of his first remarks Ibn Masʿūd was hesitant about their status as sūras, but as they were unquestionably part of the Qurʾān in the *umma's* belief, his doubts dissipated and he came to believe likewise.[20]

This is the staunchest argument I have come across in support of these accusations. To dissect this further I will rely on the *muḥaddithīn's* methodology to show the error of Ibn Ḥajar's stance.

ii. Ibn Masʿūd's Beliefs

Earlier I asserted that *al-Fātiḥa*, the seven most oft-repeated verses in mosques and houses since the Prophet's time, could not by any stretch of logic have been denied by Ibn Masʿūd. That leaves us with sūras 113 and 114. In the third account, we find that Ubayy, on hearing that he had omitted the concluding sūras, made no attempt to rebuff him. What does this imply? Either that he agreed with him, or disagreed but held back due to indifference. Given that Ubayy's Muṣḥaf included both sūras we cannot affirm the former; similarly we must reject the latter because apathy is tantamount to saying that people are free to choose whichever morsels of the Qurʾān they find appealing. No one can champion this attitude and still remain Muslim. Therefore the report of Ubayy's silence is plainly false.[21]

Next we turn to Ibn aṣ-Ṣabbāgh's harmonisation. Many Companions such as Fāṭima, ʿĀʾisha, Abū Huraira, Ibn ʿAbbās and Ibn Masʿūd, report

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19 As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, i:221.

20 See as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, i:221-22. In translating this Burton committed dishonesty. Compare the original text with the latter's rendering in *The Collection of the Qurʾān*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977, pp. 223-24.

21 See the paragraph about al-Bāqillānī, pp. 199-200.

that the Prophet used to recite the Qur'ān with Archangel Jibrīl annually during Ramaḍān, doing so twice in the year of his death. In that final year Ibn Mas'ūd was a participant. He also twice recited the Book to the Prophet, who extolled him with the words *laqad aḥsanta* (لقد أحسنت : 'you have done well'). Based on this incident Ibn 'Abbās considers Ibn Mas'ūd's readings to be definitive.[22] Such accolades demonstrate that the Qur'ān was etched in his memory with full certainty; his pupils, distinguished names such as 'Alqama, al-Aswad, Masrūq, as-Sulamī, Abū Wā'il, ash-Shaibānī, al-Hamadānī, and Zirr, transmitted the Qur'ān from him in its 114 sūra entirety. One of Zirr's students, 'Āṣim, is alone in reporting this abnormal account even though he himself taught the whole Book on Ibn Mas'ūd's authority.[23]

One of Ibn Ḥajar's works, a small treatise on *ḥadīth* named *Nuzhat al-Naẓar*, tells us that if a trustworthy narrator (say a grade B scholar) goes against another narrator of higher standing (a grade A scholar), or that if we have more scholars (all of the same grade) supporting one version of the story over the other, then the lower narration is labelled *shādh* (شاذ: abnormal and weak). In the above report what we have is a lone statement swimming against a tidal wave of thousands, so this must be treated as *bāṭil* (باطل : false).[24] This is based on the *muḥaddithīn's* own methodology, and though Ibn Ḥajar cites the rule in his book, it seems that he had a mental lapse and forgot about it in this instance, as even the greatest minds are prone to do. One may argue that building a case against a *shādh* or *bāṭil* report requires the presence of two conflicting statements, while what we have here is a single account regarding the erasure of sūras 113 and 114, with nothing to the contrary. The reason is simple: in a normal situation only abnormality gets reported. For example, that the blood gushing in our veins is red is something we take for granted, but blue blood (the horseshoe crab) is out of the ordinary and so gains a measure of publicity. By the same token, we cannot reproach Ibn Mas'ūd's students for failing to tell us whether their teacher believed in 114 sūras, since that is the norm. Only those who believe in less, or more, become news.

The comments I have made about Ibn Mas'ūd's Muṣḥaf can be similarly repeated for Ubayy bin Ka'b, or anyone else for that matter.

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22 For details see Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ḥadīth nos. 2494, 3001, 3012, 3422, 3425, 3469, 3539 and 3845. Of particular note are 3001 and 3422.

23 As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, i:221.

24 Ibn Ḥajar, *Nuzhat al-Naẓar*, pp. 36-37.